Indonesia 1958: Nixon, the CIA, and the Secret War

By L. Fletcher Prouty

What was the story behind Nixon's harsh action against Wisner?

Was that the deep-rooted reason why CIA top-echelon insiders such as Dick Helms really hated and distrusted Nixon? In later years did they take out their grudge against him with a piece of tape on a Watergate doorway? There may never be answers to these questions, or perhaps they have been answered already. It is said that when the great volcanic mountain of Krakatoa in Indonesia blew up causing the greatest explosion the world had ever known, the dust of Indonesia was spread all over the world. The holocausts of 1958 and 1965 may have done the same thing. - Prouty at the end of this peice he wrote.

> **Frank Wisner and E. Howard Hunt**
>
>
>
> **Frank Gardiner Wisner** (June 23, 1909 – October 29, 1965) was one of the founding officers of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and played a major role in CIA operations throughout the 1950s.
>
> Wisner began his intelligence career in the Office of Strategic Services in World War II. After the war, he headed the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), one of the OSS successor organizations, from 1948 to 1950. In 1950, the OPC was placed under the Central Intelligence Agency and renamed the Directorate of Plans. First headed by Allen Dulles, Wisner succeeded Dulles in 1951 when Dulles was named Director of Central Intelligence.
>
> *Wisner remained as Deputy Director of Plans (DDP) until September 1958, playing an important role in the early history of the CIA*. He suffered a breakdown in 1958, and retired from the Agency in 1962. He committed suicide in 1965.

> E. Howard Hunt (1918–2007) was a CIA officer who joined the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) around 1949-1950, specializing in covert political action and psychological warfare. As a key operative under Frank Wisner, Hunt participated in early Cold War covert operations before becoming a central figure in the 1970s Watergate scandal.

Blood ran in the streets. Villages were wiped out and a million people massacred in a battle for the riches and political control of Indonesia.

Nixon and the CIA wanted Sukarno overthrown. But the creator of Indonesia knew how to fight.

A letter from one of the most beautiful women in the world lies buried in a stack of mail on President Ford's desk. Written in Paris on July 24, 1975, by Dewi Sukarno, the former First Lady of Indonesia and widow of Dr. Achmed Sukarno, the charismatic Father of Indonesia, the letter is an appeal to President Ford for a complete explanation of the CIA-led and supported rebellions that took place in Indonesia in 1958 and 1965. It is not well known in the United States that the 1958 rebellion led to a major Indonesian civil war. The CIA-inspired uprising in Indonesia, unlike the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, was a full-scale military operation. The Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 was made by a thin brigade of about 1,500 Cuban exiles trained by the CIA in Guatemala. But the 1958 Indonesian action involved no less than 42,000 CIA-armed rebels supported by a fleet of bombers and vast numbers of four-engine transport aircraft as well as submarine assistance from the U.S. Navy. It also involved a major training and logistical supporting effort on the part of the Philippines, Okinawa, Taiwan, and Singapore. But despite this massive armed force, the 1958 rebellion, like the Bay of Pigs invasion, was a total failure. Sukarno's army drove the rebels on Sumatra and Celebes into the sea.

There are some who might call the 1965 uprising a success. At least the rebels were not driven into the sea. However, for the United States it was a fantastically costly endeavor. The rebellion ended in the most massive and ruthless bloodbath since World War II. While the headlines in the United States dealt with the slaughter in Vietnam, the press of the rest of the world heaped blame on the United States for the barbaric massacre in Indonesia. The victorious new government of General Suharto proceeded to assassinate nearly one million people. This terrible slaughter and the ensuing imprisonment of tens of thousands of Indonesians stirred Dewi Sukarno to seek President Ford's assistance in gaining the release of her countrymen from prison.

Dewi Sukarno has received no answer. But even without a reply she knows. The silence from Washington speaks for itself. A denial, if true, would have come without hesitation. The Indonesians know. The Latins had a phrase for it, "Is fecit cui prodest" - the perpetrator of a crime is he who profits by it. Today, major U.S. enterprises are plundering the raw material wealth of Indonesia - rubber, tin, and oil - in a manner that is more vile than what is happening in Chile. And there is no one to stop them.

Achmed Sukarno was one of those rare men who rose during the hours of crisis to unite one hundred million people and lead them out of the ashes of World War II. Sukarno came to liberate his country from the Japanese, the Dutch, the Portuguese, and from all others who were ready to enslave his country once again. He established his government on the "Five Pillars": (l) belief in one supreme God (2) just and civilized humanity (3) unity of Indonesia (4) democracy (5) social justice.

Sukarno was forced to thread his way between communism and capitalism. His independence made him both friends and enemies. His worst enemies came from his polyglot people who are scattered over more than 3,000 islands. These islands make up the world's largest archipelago; they stretch along the equator for over 3,400 miles and are located in Southeast Asia between the Philippines and Australia. From one of these islands came Lt. Col. Alex Kawilarang, the military attache serving in Washington who was to defect to the rebel forces and lead the rebel contingent on Sumatra, the Indonesian island richest in natural resources.

> *His Excellency President Gerald Ford*
> *The White House*
> *Washington, D.C.*
>
> Dear Mr. President,
>
> As the widow of the late President Sukarno and being the only member of the family living overseas, I address myself to you, being deeply alarmed and disturbed by numerous and persistent reports in the international press. For instance, the CIA is said to have spied on my husband: manufactured a fake film in order to slander the good name and honor of Sukarno: prepared an assassination attempt against him and conspired to oust him from power to estrange him from the Indonesian people by accusing him of collaborating with international communism in betrayal of Indonesian independence, which of course was totally absurd.
>
> My husband has repeatedly informed me that he was fully aware of these immoral, illegal, subversive, anti-Indonesian activities against his beloved Indonesia, his people, and against him personally.
>
> I would like to request from you, as well as from the responsible Congressional Committees in the United States a full explanation about these reports and reprehensible practices as carried out by an official United States Government Agency in the name of several American Presidents and Governments.
>
> Both in 1958 and in 1965, the CIA directly interfered in the internal affairs of Indonesia. In 1958,

this monstrous action led to civil war.

In 1965, it led to the ultimate takeover by a pro-Amencan military regime, while hundreds of thousands of innocent peasants and loyal citizens were massacred in the name of this insane crusade against international communism. Still today, ten years later, many tens of thousands of true patriots and Sukarnoists are locked up in jails and concentration camps being denied the simplest and most elementary human rights. American companies and aggressive foreign interests are indiscriminately plundering the natural riches of Indonesia to the advantage of the few and the disadvantage of the millions of unemployed and impoverished masses.

I must now ask you, Mr. President, in the name of freedom and justice, in the name of decency in relations between states and statesmen, between powerful nations and developing lands, in the name of the Indonesian people and the Sukarno family: did the United States of America commit these hideous crimes against Indonesia and against the founder of the nation? Will your Government be prepared to accept responsibility for these evil practices? Over one hundred million Indonesians have been brainwashed, as was the rest of the world by the present regime's propaganda to believe that the communists carried out the insurrection. My countrymen, as well as everyone else, have the right to know the truth of the historic facts. It will be the painful duty for America now to reveal the CIA involvement in Indonesia and release all information and documents relevant to who really initiated the terrifying bloodbath that led to the overthrow of the legal Government and to the inhuman treatment in house arrest lasting three years until my husband's death.

In closing, I would like to strongly appeal to you, Mr. President, to use your influence with the military regime in Jakarta, to immediately free those many thousands of political prisoners, men and women, former cabinet ministers, writers and journalists, who I know are entirely innocent of the crime of treason they have been accused of. If the United States were to be instrumental in helping to improve the fate of so many thousands of courageous compatriots, I think the entire Indonesian nation would be grateful and Indonesians would regain their confidence in America's intentions towards the Third World.

Respectfully,

R. S. Dewi Sukarno
July 24, 1975

What is not generally known about the complex Indonesian struggle is the role that was played by the then **Vice President of the United States, Richard M. Nixon**, *and the bitter aftermath that involved the sudden ouster of Allen Dulles' protege, Frank Wisner, who at that time was the head of the clandestine arm of the CIA.*

After Watergate, when Anthony Lukas wrote in his book Nightmare, about the growing mistrust between Nixon and the Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms, he could have added that since the 1958 Indonesian rebellion there were many in the CIA who made a career of hating Nixon because of what he had done to Frank Wisner, among others.

The Indonesian campaign began rather casually as so many CIA ventures do. Few if any ever originate at the top.

During an unguarded conversation in Washington the Indonesian military attache mentioned earlier made it known to certain U.S. military acquaintances that there were many prominent and strong people in Indonesia who would be ready to rise against Sukarno if they were given a little support and encouragement from the United States. It happened that one of those U.S. military friends he talked to was not a military man at all, but a member of the CIA. The provocative words got back to Frank Wisner, then the Deputy Director of Plans. He was in charge of the CIA's clandestine activity and he authorized agents to follow up on that first conversation.

The Indonesian attache was wined and dined and encouraged to talk more. Reasons for the attache's return to Indonesia on official business were successfully arranged. He was accompanied by CIA agents traveling under the cover of "U.S. military" personnel. During this visit they spoke with rebel leaders. They learned enough about the potential strength of this opposition to encourage the CIA to set in motion its biggest operation up to that date.

In the Philippines there was a strong nucleus of military men, chief among them a Colonel Valeriano, who had been President Magsaysay's military assistant. He had also worked on paramilitary exercises with the CIA during the Magsaysay campaign against the leftist rebel Huk movement. This military group had gained considerable power during the Magsaysay tenure. Many of these special warfare experts from the Philippines had volunteered for duty in South Vietnam in 1955 when the CIA was deeply involved in providing undercover support for the new and uncertain regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

By early 1958 these Filipinos and their CIA counterparts were prepared to involve the Philippines in the rebellion against Sukarno by setting up special warfare "Green Beret" training bases and by providing the Indonesian revolutionary council with clandestine air bases. One of those bases was on Palawan, the most western island of the Philippine archipelago, in the vicinity of the airfield at Puerto Princessa on Honda Bay. The other base was on the big southern island of Mindanao, near Davao Gulf.

Concurrently, in Washington, operations were being organized. Frank Wisner took over direct command of the everyday operations of the Indonesian project. A large staff under Desmond Fitzgerald of the Far East Division was set up. The most active element of this special staff came from the CIA's clandestine Air Division which at that time was under the control of Dick Helms. As the plans expanded for this major undertaking, requirements for military equipment, people, aircraft, weapons, bases, submarines, and communications skyrocketed.

In the Pentagon there are thousands of nondescript offices in which all sorts of tasks are done. One of these unobtrusive offices was an Air Force Plans Division office. One day in 1958 two men from the CIA entered that office. After being identified they were permitted entrance to an interior office that was the "Focal Point" office for all U.S. Air Force Support of the clandestine operations of the CIA. I had established that office in 1955 on orders from Gen. Thomas D. White, then Chief of Staff of the Air Force. This came about after several meetings with Allen W. Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence, and others. When the CIA men entered that office in 1958, I was still in charge.

The agents outlined the Indonesian Plan, the Philippine support and training program, and told me about their own special operations staff that had been put together specifically for this vast project. Then they urgently requested light bombardment aircraft and long-range transport aircraft. We decided to take a number of twin engine B-26 aircraft out of bone-yard storage, put them through a retrofit line, and modify them so that they could be armed with a special 50-caliber machine gun package of eight guns, in the nose of the plane. This would give the B-26 more firepower than it ever had during the Korean War or World War II. The project was given top priority and covered in deep secrecy. Programs for pilot training and the recruitment of "mercenaries" were established.

Concurrent with our work the CIA was putting together a "wartime" operational staff. Lt. Gen. Earl Barnes, who had been a senior air commander during World War II under Gen. Douglas MacArthur, was brought in to run all clandestine air activities.

At that time Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer was Commander in Chief of the Ryukyu Command on Okinawa. One day he received a call from General David M. Shoup, the U.S. Marine Commander on Okinawa, asking if the Army could spare 14,000 rifles for a Marine requirement. Surprised at the Marine request for such a large order of guns, Lemnitzer acquiesced nonetheless and ordered the transfer of these weapons on the condition that they would be quickly replaced.

High on the ridge line of central Okinawa overlooking the city of Naha there was a modest size "Army" installation that hustled with considerable activity. This was the main CIA operational base in the Far East. It was under the direction of Ted Shannon, one of the Agency's most powerful agents. It was Shannon's office that had actually requested 42,000 rifles from General Shoup and since the order was so large Shoup had been unable to supply them, and had therefore borrowed 14,000 from the Army.

On nearby Taiwan, the CIA had another large facility - a “Navy” base known as the Naval Auxiliary Communication Center (NACC). This “Comm Center” controlled a large and very active air base a few miles south of Taiwan’s capital, Taipei, and the huge Air America facilities near Taipei and the city of Tainan.

The B-26 bombers were ready to fly and a special ferrying arrangement was made with the Air Force to fly them across the Pacific to the Philippines and Menado.

Rebel Indonesians, trained and equipped in the Philippines, were returned to Sumatra. Some were air-dropped and others landed on the beach from submarines that the U.S. Navy was operating, in support of the CIA, in the oceans south of Indonesia near the Christmas Islands.

The war was on.

On Feb. 9, 1958, rebel Colonel Maluddin Simbolon issued an ultimatum in the name of a provincial government, the Central Sumatran Revolutionary Council, calling for the formation of a new central government. Sukarno refused and called upon his loyal army commander, General Abdul Haris Nasution, to destroy the rebel forces. By Feb. 21 loyal forces had been airlifted to Sumatra and had begun the attack. The rebel headquarters was in the southern coastal city of Padang. Rebel strongholds stretched all the way to Medan, near the northern end of the island and not far from Malaysia.

This was important administratively because by that time Frank Wisner, the CIA Deputy Director of Plans, had set up his forward headquarters in Singapore and at the direction of the 5412 Committee of the National Security Council, headed by Nixon, Wisner occupied that faraway headquarters himself. (It should be noted that in 1958 Allen Dulles was the head of the CIA, his brother John Foster Dulles was the Secretary of State, Eisenhower was President, and Nixon, as Vice President, chaired the clandestine affairs committee, then known as the “*Special Group 5412/2*.” In other words nothing was done in Indonesia that was not directed by Nixon. If an action had not been directed by the NSC, then it was done unlawfully by the CIA.)

In 1958 Allen Dulles would have brought such a major operation to the attention of the Special Group and he would operate with its approval. This was an essential step in national policy because it then empowered the Department of Defense to provide the necessary support requested by the CIA. Much of this fell within the area of my responsibility at Air Force Headquarters, and I was kept informed on a regular basis of approved action and of Nixon’s keen interest in this project.

The rebellion flared sporadically from one end of Indonesia to the other.

While the CIA was supporting up to 100,000 rebels, the State Department professed innocence. The U.S. ambassador, Howard P. Jones, maintained that the United States had nothing to do with the rebellion and he protested the capture of the American oil properties. On the other hand, Sukarno had asked for more arms aid

from the United States. He must have had strong suspicions about the source of rebel support. The vast number of guns, the bombers and heavy air transport aircraft dropping hundreds of tons of arms and equipment, as well as submarines supporting beach operations were just too sophisticated to be anything but major power ploys. Thus, his appeal for U.S. arms aid had the ring of gamesmanship.

Playing along with the game, John Foster Dulles issued a statement saying that the United States would not provide arms to either side. And while he was publishing that falsehood, the United States furnished and piloted B-26 bombers, and these were bombing shipping in the Makassar Straits. Some had even flown as far south as the Java Sea. Almost immediately all insurance rates on shipping to and from Indonesia went on a wartime scale and costs became so prohibitive that most shipping actually ceased. The bombing attacks, kept so quiet in the United States that they hardly made the news, were being viewed with great alarm by the rest of the world. What was "Top Secret" in Washington was barroom gossip in the capitals of the world.

While Wisner communicated with Washington clandestinely, anyone in the bar at the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, in the Peninsula Hotel in Kowloon, or even on the streets of Istanbul, could learn all about the "American CIA attack" on Sukarno.

The CIA was demanding so much support for its far-flung operations that a top-level committee was established in the Pentagon. Its purpose was to keep track of how much war equipment was being requested and sent to Indonesia. Not unlike the Lemnitzer-Shoup rifle problem, there were problems in the Pentagon because of the way the CIA requested equipment through phony "military" cover channels.

Early in this operation I had put some men from my office into the air-combat section in the Philippines, and the Air Force was reasonably well aware of what was going on. But that was not so for the other services. At the time, Admiral Arleigh Burke was the *Chief of Naval Operations*. He went one step further than we did. At the height of the rebel operations, Burke sent his Chief of Naval Intelligence, Admiral Luther Frost, to Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, where he stayed for several months carrying on a delicate relationship with the American ambassador and with the Indonesian naval chiefs. This, while U.S. Navy submarines were aiding the rebels south of Sumatra. It turned out to have been a masterful gambit because later, when the rebellion collapsed, the U.S. Navy was able to declare innocence. The Air Force was not so fortunate.

The pretense that the U.S. Government was in no way involved in this massive civil war against Sukarno was wearing thin. It was a reasonable cover as long as the United States could plausibly deny its role in the action. But one day, a lone B-26 out of the rebel CIA base at Menado, flying low over the Straits of Makassar, came upon an Indonesian ship - an ideal target. The pilot banked to take a good run at the ship and began strafing it with those eight lethal .50-caliber machine guns. He was committed to the attack before he found out that the freighter was armed. The B-26 was hit and it ditched near the ship. The pilot, an American named Allan Lawrence Pope, was picked up. Pope was identified as a former U.S. Air Force pilot. The cork was out of the bottle. Sukarno had his proof of U.S. involvement and he played his ace card for an international audience.

That one plane and that one pilot cost the U.S. Government tens of millions of dollars in ransom and tribute during the next several years.

After the capture of Pope the rebellion rapidly fell apart. Loyal forces captured Donggala in central Celebes. And on far away Halmahera, government forces captured Jailolo. That ended all opposition except for the CIA-rebel air base at Menado. With the rebellion all but crushed, except for the continued existence of the main CIA force, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles ended the embargo of arms to Sukarno and agreed to send aid to the government of Indonesia! What wondrous duplicity! And Sukarno was not fooled. His forces had been fighting a major civil war inspired and clandestinely supported by the United States, while concurrently the overt branches of the U.S. Government acted as though nothing at all had happened.

By the end of June 1958 it was all over. Then a very strange and rare (rare in terms of normal bureaucracy) thing happened. During the months of this operation it had been my custom to visit the CIA special operations center.

One morning I caught the unmarked, dull-green CIA shuttle bus at the Pentagon and rode to the operations center. I went in. Not a soul was there. The place had been cleaned out. Office after office was absolutely bare. Finally I found one secretary. She was sitting in a straight-back chair and her telephone was on the floor. There were tears in her eyes. She took a call from time to time and gave guarded answers about the former members of that huge staff. The entire section had been scattered to the four corners of the world. A large number of top-level, experienced, clandestine agents and operators had vanished. It took our Air Force office, skilled as we were in the ways of the CIA, months to find some of them again.

Then we began to piece together what had happened. With the collapse of such a major effort and with the inability of the Government to deny plausibly before the world its role in the whole sordid affair, blame had to be placed somewhere. In an unprecedented action, Nixon had summarily fired Frank Wisner, along with some others. But Frank Wisner, a longtime OSS and CIA man, was a key intelligence officer. Few knew enough about his career to realize that he was senior, by far, to Helms and Colby. Clearly, he was Allen Dulles' heir apparent.

When the OSS had been deactivated after World War II by President Truman, it was Wisner who had kept a tight-knit band of professionals together. This small cadre kept valuable OSS records and, more importantly, they had maintained the delicate lines of communication with agents, spies, and underground personnel in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Germany. They held this fragile web together. Without them hundreds of people might have been killed and priceless assets destroyed. And Frank Wisner suddenly, almost whimsically, had been fired.

To a man, the Agency was aroused by this action. Rightly or wrongly, they hated Nixon for this. I remember being at meetings during which the name of Nixon would be mentioned and I have seen CIA men bristle and

redden as though someone had let a poisonous snake loose in the room. Some vowed he would never become President.

Meanwhile the Agency moved to pull itself together. That one deft bloodbath appeared to end things. There was no Board of Inquiry as there was after the Bay of Pigs. And, remarkably, there was no public outcry as there would be a few years later after the U-2 scandal. The agency was busy sweeping things under the rug.

Meanwhile those special B-26s were all flown back to the States and based at Elgin Air Force Base in Flonda. That was late in 1958. By 1959 they began to stir again. A man named Castro had come to power in Cuba. During those fateful days in April 1961 it was those same B-26s that the CIA used to attack Cuba.

This is the story that Dewi Sukarno is asking President Ford to explain to her and to the Indonesian people. Actually, the 1958 civil war was child's play compared to the brutal bloodbath of 1965. Sukarno was in control after the 1958 disaster and he wrung a heavy tribute from the U.S. Government for its indiscretions. But in 1965 his game ended, like Allende's in Chile, with defeat. An attempted communist coup d'etat was defeated by General Suharto. Sukarno never made the great public statement that was to assure the success of the coup, and after its defeat and the ensuing bloodbath, he was stripped of his power. After a few years of ignominious house arrest the hero of all Indonesia died in 1970.

What was the story behind Nixon's harsh action against Wisner?

Was that the deep-rooted reason why CIA top-echelon insiders such as Dick Helms really hated and distrusted Nixon? In later years did they take out their grudge against him with a piece of tape on a Watergate doorway? There may never be answers to these questions, or perhaps they have been answered already. It is said that when the great volcanic mountain of Krakatoa in Indonesia blew up causing the greatest explosion the world had ever known, the dust of Indonesia was spread all over the world. The holocausts of 1958 and 1965 may have done the same thing.

* * * * * * *